

The New York Times

Fred Greenstein, 88, Dies; Political 'Psychologist' Assessed Presidents

By Katharine Q. Seelye

Dec. 14, 2018

Fred Greenstein, a pre-eminent scholar of political psychology who devised a systematic approach to evaluating the leadership styles of American presidents and who helped breathe new life into the reputation of Dwight D. Eisenhower, died on Dec. 3 at his home in Princeton, N.J. He was 88.

His wife, Barbara Greenstein, said the cause was complications of a form of Parkinson's disease.

Dr. Greenstein, who taught politics at Princeton University for nearly three decades, first made his mark with a reconsideration of Eisenhower, who was long perceived as disengaged from the job. Dr. Greenstein's book, "The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader" (1982), upended that view. It showed the genial golf-playing president to be a man of action behind the scenes, "the Clark Kent of the American presidency."

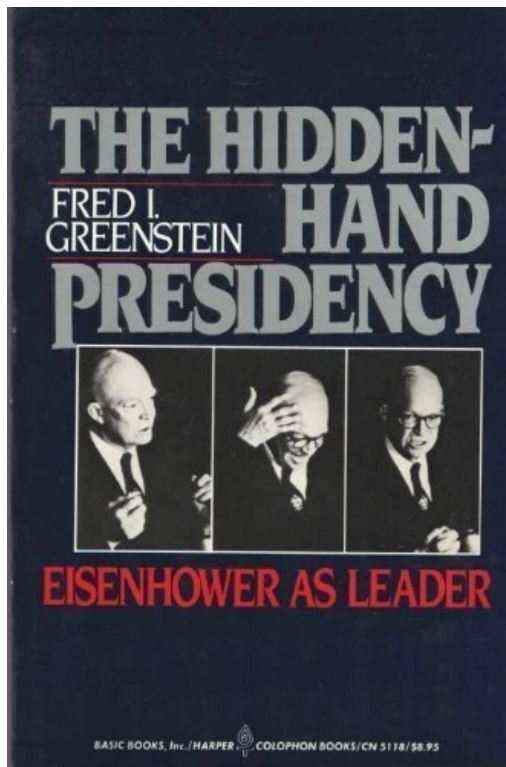
While writing that book, Dr. Greenstein was absorbed by a longer-term project that would enable him, over time, to evaluate 30 of the nation's presidents on the basis of their effectiveness as leaders, rather than by their policies or accomplishments.

He devised a checklist of six qualities by which to evaluate success or failure in the Oval Office: public communication; organizational capacity; political skill; vision; cognitive style; and emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence, he maintained, was the most important. In his book, "The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Clinton" (2000), Dr. Greenstein said emotional intelligence could be measured by "the president's ability to manage his emotions and turn them to constructive purposes, rather than being dominated by them and allowing them to diminish his leadership."

President Bill Clinton's second term, part of which was consumed by his impeachment, Dr. Greenstein wrote, was a reminder that without emotional intelligence "the presidency is a defective instrument of democratic governance."

Dr. Greenstein's 1982 book about Eisenhower upended the view that the 34th president was disengaged from his job.



Dr. Greenstein arrived at Princeton as the Watergate scandal was unfolding. He was especially intrigued by how someone as politically gifted as President Richard M. Nixon could end up “succumbing to what was plainly a self-inflicted political disaster.”

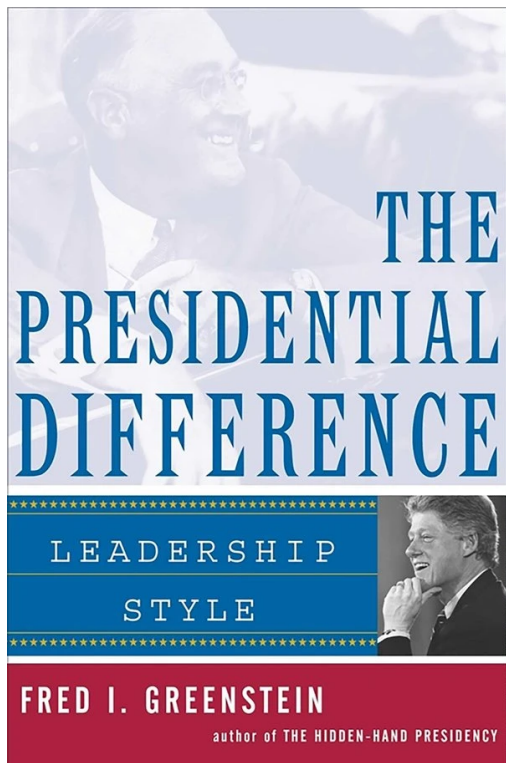
But rather than confine himself to the “enigma” of Nixon, he looked broadly at what he called “presidential political psychology,” as evinced in the modern presidency, which started with Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Dr. Greenstein’s “enduring accomplishment was to get away from thinking about presidents one by one and thinking about them systematically, so that he could pinpoint the characteristics that made an effective leader,” R. Douglas Arnold, a professor of politics and public affairs at Princeton, said in a phone interview.

Although it was Nixon’s disintegration that piqued Dr. Greenstein’s interest in presidential psychology, it was the archives of Eisenhower and other presidents that gave him the tools to plumb the meaning of leadership.

The prevailing view of Eisenhower had been set in Richard E. Neustadt’s seminal work, “Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents” (originally published in 1960 and later updated). It portrayed Eisenhower as more interested in playing golf than running the country.

But archival material, including transcripts of phone calls, suggested otherwise to Dr. Greenstein. “He found memos that Eisenhower had dictated off the top of his head that were exquisitely well reasoned and well written,” Dr. Arnold said. “They showed him to be a deep and careful thinker and politically skillful, almost Machiavellian.”



In this 2000 book, Dr. Greenstein described his checklist of six qualities by which to evaluate success or failure in the Oval Office. He said emotional intelligence was the most important.

Dr. Greenstein posited that Eisenhower's famously poor communication skills actually stemmed from a strategic decision to deliberately obfuscate so that he might appear genial rather than partisan, while behind the scenes he was in full control, pulling strings and manipulating subordinates.

"We tended to think of Eisenhower as a dumb president who was syntactically challenged," John P. Burke, a former student of Dr. Greenstein's who collaborated with him on a book and is now a presidential scholar at the University of Vermont, said by phone. "Maybe that was true, but he was willing to play the fool to achieve his political ends."

This was evident when the White House press secretary was worried that Eisenhower would be drawn into a discussion at a news conference on a sensitive topic that he did not want to discuss.

"If that question comes up, I'll just confuse them," Eisenhower responded. (He succeeded.)

Since Dr. Greenstein's book was published in 1982, Eisenhower's stature in the eyes of historians has risen steadily.

In 1962, in a survey of historians by Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., Eisenhower ranked 22nd on its list of best presidents; in 1982, in a Chicago Tribune survey, he jumped to ninth; and in 2017, in C-SPAN survey, he ranked fifth.

Fred Irwin Greenstein was born on Sept. 1, 1930, in the Bronx. His father, Arthur, was a buyer for a department store in Portland, Ore., and his mother, Rose (Goldstein) Greenstein, was a homemaker.

As his father was promoted, the family moved frequently around the New York City area and eventually moved to the Chicago area. Fred graduated from Highland Park High School and earned his bachelor's degree from Antioch College in Ohio in 1953.

He spent two years in the Army, serving in Germany, and received his doctorate in political science from Yale in 1960. In 1957, he married Barbara Elferink, with whom he had three children.

In addition to his wife, he is survived by his son, Michael; two daughters, Amy Greenstein Dahn and Jessica Greenstein; six grandchildren; and his sister, Betty Greene.

Dr. Greenstein taught at Yale and Wesleyan in Connecticut before moving to Princeton in 1973. He was chairman of Princeton's politics department from 1986 to 1990 and retired in 2001. He was the author or a co-author of eight books. At his death, he was finishing a ninth, with Dale Anderson, on presidents of the Progressive Era.

To the end, Dr. Greenstein remained publicly neutral on his personal views of the presidents, including Donald J. Trump.

"He said Trump's presidency is fascinating to a scholar of leadership because it's so different from anything else," Mr. Anderson said in a phone interview.

"I said, 'You're like an epidemiologist who says this plague is fascinating,' " Mr. Anderson said.

"All he said was, 'I hope I last long enough to write this one up.' "

A version of this article appears in print on Dec. 16, 2018, on Page A20 of the New York edition with the headline: Fred Greenstein, 88, A Political 'Psychologist' Who Assessed Presidents